FLAMENCO RHYTHMS

One of the characteristics of flamenco music is its great variety of styles. Some have an established rhythmic structure (Soleá, Sigüiriya, Bulería, etc), while others are free-metered (Tonás, Taranta, Granaína, Malagueña, etc). However, this is a Flamencómetro Oscar Herrero, so let’s focus on styles with a rhythmic structure.

The first flamenco instrument was the human voice, the cante, sung by the cantaor, and the first cantes, unsurprisingly perhaps, did not have a fixed metre (Tonás, Martinete, Debla, etc). Later on, around 1840 it seems, the guitar began to be used to accompany the voice rhythmically and harmonically, palmas (clapping), pitos (finger snapping) and golpeo (knocking knuckles on a table or a stick on the floor) were used as percussion instruments, and dancing visually embellished the singing. They all took their lead from the voice. At this point the ‘workers’ set to it and began to establish rhythmic rules for the cantes. New styles were born and the 12-beat flamenco compás, or measure, came into being, giving rise to a wide variety of different styles such as Soleá, Sigüiriya, Bulería, Alegría, Guajira, etc. As flamenco performers had no written music, they invented a jargon to make themselves understood, with terms such as Cierre (a rhythmic break), Remate (a finishing flurry) or Llamada (a call or signal). A new music was born called FLAMENCO.

Flamenco music is a language for communicating, expressing happiness, sadness, rage, passion. Traditionally, flamenco musicians learnt by listening, imitating and repeating, like a baby learning to speak. This clearly has a positive effect on flamenco musicians, but it is also negative because they plainly lack ‘schooling’. It is my belief that the ideal place for a musician, any musician, to learn is at school. Academic training is of the utmost importance, but so is the education to be gained from performers who learnt from others in the school of life. Perhaps both schools must be attended in order to learn completely.

Throughout the history of flamenco, people have said to sing or play or dance flamenco you have to be born with it, feel it inside. It can’t be taught. I agree. Any activity in life requires certain basic skills, but they need to be developed. Just how many guitarists, singers, dancers, painters, doctors are there hidden away around the world? How many geniuses who weren’t born into the right environment to develop their skills? If Paco de Lucía’s father hadn’t liked flamenco and had moved to Australia or any other place where Paco wouldn’t have come into contact with flamenco, would he have become a guitarist? He might have been a genius, but perhaps it would have been as a doctor or a great writer or an artist of another kind. Among all the children who are starving to death or can’t go to school, there must surely be hidden geniuses. I have always believed that people are born with their talent, with all that destiny has in store, then their vocation stirs up inside them and finally they learn their trade from those who know it well and can teach them. That’s why each life evolves with what is learnt and added along the way. Gypsies, they say, have a special feel for flamenco rhythm. Are they born with compás? Or is it perhaps a “gift” that comes from listening over and over again from the cradle to the rhythm of bulerías and tangos and the clickety-clickety-clack of hands clapping? If gypsies and payos (non-gypsies) swapped cradles at birth, we would see just how profoundly important our upbringing is, where we truly come from, as we struggle and strive for
what we feel and what we desire, regardless of our origins because, nearly always, they are nothing but happenstance and stereotypes that have never contributed anything to the greatness of flamenco.

The Flamencómetro Oscar Herrero aims to offer you the depth of knowledge that comes from growing up in an environment, gypsy or otherwise, where people live and breathe rhythm, compás. When you practice a falseta, a dance step or a cante, we want you to feel the flamenco compás and truly master it. Even if it is web application, the rhythms are programmed with real feeling so they can also be enjoyed as an accompaniment. For the programming, I wanted an outstanding percussionist like Jesús Mañeru. That’s why the rhythms on this Flamencómetro breathe life. Just listen and see what you think.

A musician with a non-flamenco background who listens to a Soleá or a Siguiriya can’t understand how the rhythms work. Flamenco challenges many of the canons of western music. Students of music, for example, are taught that there are three basic rhythms, 2-beat, 3-beat and 4-beat, and the accent is always on the first beat. However, early flamenco rhythms have 12 beats that combine 2-beat and 3-beat rhythms with the accent on the last beat:

Conventional rhythm:

Two-beat:  1  2  1  2

Three-beat:  1  2  3  1  2  3

Flamenco rhythm:

Two-beat:  1  2  1  2  1  2

Three-beat:  1  2  3  1  2  3

This is the first shock that awaits any musician with a non-flamenco background. And there are more to come, because early flamenco rhythms are long so they’re harder to keep under control, they have an irregular accent pattern and, as explained above, they combine two- and three-beat rhythms.

Flamenco styles can be divided into six groups according to rhythm types:

* The correct tempo for each style is indicated. However, this is very flexible because there are variations within each style and the tempo can fluctuate significantly.
**A) 12-beat rhythms**

**In 12/4**

(In Flamenco Mode)

- **Soleá** $\downarrow = 90 \pm$ accompanying toques: Bambera, Caña and Polo.

- **Soleá por Bulería** $\downarrow = 150 \pm$ accompanying toque: Alboreá.

(In Ionian or Major Mode)

- **Alegría** $\downarrow = 150 \pm$ accompanying toques: Cantiñas, Caracoles, Mirabrás and Romera.

All these styles share the same basic accent pattern:

```
> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 > 8 9 10 > 11 > 12
```

This accent pattern variation can also be used as the basic rhythm:

```
> 1 2 3 4 5 6 > 7 > 8 9 10 > 11 > 12
```

This is because not all the accents are the same. Beats 3 and 10 are the most marked, then beats 4, 5 and 6 relax to start the second half of the compás, and they increase in intensity up to beat 10. The ending is a remate, a cierre or a llamada, giving the singer or dancer a 2-beat margin to enter or continue. These styles end on beat 10, so the last compás has only ten beats. So, although flamenco music is very ‘free’, certain rules must be followed to get along, and these are the rules of the compás.

These are the basic accent patterns, but they are not the only ones. There are different patterns within each style, especially when creating guitar melodies or dance steps. For **Soleá**, **Soleá por Bulería** or **Alegría**, for example:

```
> 1 2 3 4 5 6 > 7 > 8 9 > 10 > 11 > 12
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> 1 2 3 4 5 > 6 = 7 > 8 9 > 10 > 11 > 12
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> 1 2 3 > 4 5 > 6 > 7 > 8 9 > 10 > 11 > 12
```

```
> 1 2 > 3 > 4 5 > 6 > 7 > 8 > 9 > 10 > 11 > 12
```
In 12/8

(In Flamenco Mode)

- Bulería \( \frac{1}{8} = 220\pm \) (also played and sung in Major and Minor Mode: Bulería de Cádiz, or Canciones por Bulería)

- Siguiriya \( \frac{1}{8} = 168\pm \) accompanying toques: Serrana, Liviana and Cabal (Cabal in Major Mode).

- Petenera \( \frac{1}{8} = 120\pm \) (the cante is free-metered with a rhythmic finish)

(In Ionian or Major Mode)

- Guajira \( \frac{1}{8} = 200\pm \)

In this subgroup, all the palos use the 12-beat flamenco rhythm, but they use it differently. Let’s look at them individually.

**BULERÍA**

This is clearly the most complex of all the styles when it comes to keeping on top of the compás. Firstly because the tempo is faster and there is less time to react, and secondly because the measure is not always 12 beats. There can be 6 beats and there can be other patterns. So when I was starting out and I was told (maybe you learnt it the same way) that the compás for bulerías had 12 beats accented on beats 3, 6, 8, 10 and 12, I used to go crazy trying to follow bulerías because I kept getting lost. It can even make you want to ignore the compás or just give up. This happens quite simply because the bulería sometimes has 12 beats and sometimes has 6. As long as you stick to even 6-beat compases it works, but if there is a 6-beat compás followed by two 12s and another 6, it gets very complicated. The basic accent pattern for a 12-beat compás for singing, dancing or playing is the same as the Soleá, Soleá por Bulería or Alegría: (In Flamenco Mode)

**Basic accent pattern:**

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 & 9 & 10 & 11 & 12 \\
\end{array}
\]

**Variation:**

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 & 9 & 10 & 11 & 12 \\
\end{array}
\]

There are three ways of accenting a 6-beat compás for singing, dancing or playing:

**A)** Beat 3 is the most marked and beat 6 is very quiet or even silent, so you always know where beat 3 is.

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 \\
\end{array}
\]

- **Bulería**
- **Siguiriya**
- **Petenera**
- **Guajira**
B) Beat 12 is the most marked and beat 3 is quiet so you always know which one is beat 12, avoiding confusion with beat 3.

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{12} & > & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\
\end{array}
\]

C) Beats 7, 8 and 10 are the most marked (beat 10 is slightly louder) and beat 12 is quiet or even silent so you are always on top of the rhythm. This variation is also used as a cierre.

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
> & > & > & (>) \\
7 & 8 & 9 & 10 & 11 & 12 \\
\end{array}
\]

6-beat compases can be used continuously while singing, dancing or playing, until a cierre or remate marks a return to a 12-beat compás. It is just a question of practice and of knowing where you are at all times.

In cante, the cantaor always leads and the guitarist follows. In dancing, the bailaor leads and the cantaor and guitarist follow. Then, after many battles as a ‘foot soldier’, a guitarist may decide to break away as a concert soloist and have others do the following. In flamenco a guitarist can play in three different ways: ‘pa cantar’ (for singing), led by the cantaor, ‘pa bailar’ (for dancing), led by the bailaor, and as a concert guitarist, using music as a free means of expression.

SIGUIRIYA

New styles developed from the 12-beat flamenco compás. One of them was the Siguiрия. The measure is like the bulería, but starting on beat 8. Flamenco musicians tend to count 5 beats which are the 5 accents: (In Flamenco Mode)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
> & > & > & > & > \\
8 & 9 & 10 & 11 & 12 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 \\
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\
\end{array}
\]

one and two and three -ee and fou- -our and fi- -ive

PETENERA

The cante is free-metered, but the guitarist’s falsetas follow the compás. This style is also based on the 12-beat compás, but this time starting on beat 12. (In Flamenco Mode)

Basic 12-beat compás:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
> & > & > & > & > \\
12 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 & 9 & 10 & 11 \\
\end{array}
\]
Two points should be made about this style.

1) The guitarist plays the *falsetas* following a 12-beat *compás*. However, when playing *compases* with *rasgueado* (multiple strumming) between *falsetas* or *cantes*, the harmonic cycles are 24 beats long, i.e. two 12-beat *compases*.

![](image1.png)

24-beat harmonic cycle (12x2)

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2) In the *falsetas*, the guitarist can divide the 12-beat *compás* into constant 3-beat patterns (6/8) or 2-beat patterns (3/4), always totalling 12. For example:

12-beat *compás* with 3 beat-patterns (2 x 6/8)

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12-beat *compás* with 2 beat-patterns (2 x 3/4)

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**GUAJIRA**

The *Guajira* *compás* has constant 3- and 2-beat *compases* like the *Petenera*, but there are no 24-beat harmonic cycles. (In Ionian or Major Mode)

**Basic 12-beat *compás***

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12-beat *compás* with 3-beat patterns (2 x 6/8)

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12-beat *compás* with 2-beat patterns (2 x 3/4)

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B) 6-beat compases

In 6/4 or 3/2

(In Flamenco Mode)

- **Fandango Natural** \( \downarrow = 120 \pm \) (in the **Fandango Natural** the *cante* is free-metered).

- **Fandango de Huelva** \( \downarrow = 150 \pm \) accompanying *toque*: **Bambera**.

*The *cante* in the **Fandango Natural** and the **Fandango de Huelva** is in Major Mode.*

(In any Mode: Flamenco, Major or Minor)

- **Sevillanas** \( \downarrow = 150 \pm \)

These styles are polyrhythmic, with two simultaneous accent patterns:

1) *Harmony* and *melody* mark every 2\textsuperscript{nd} beat (3/2). Beats 1 and 5 are the most marked:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{Basic 6-beat compás with 2-beat patterns (3/2)} \\
\text{Basic 6-beat compás with 3-beat patterns (6/4)} \\
\text{Combined accent}
\end{array}
\]

2) *Rhythmic accent pattern* every 3 beats (6/4)

However, they have different characteristics. In the **Fandango Natural**, as in the **Petenera**, the singing is **free**-metered, hence its other name **Fandango Libre**, but the guitarist plays *falsetas* in the basic 6-beat compás for *harmony* and *melody* with accents every two beats (3/2). During the *rasgueado* between *falsetas* or *cantes* the guitarist plays harmonic cycles of 2 compases with this traditional harmony:

**12**-beat harmonic cycle (6x2)

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The difference between the **Fandango Natural** and the **Fandango de Huelva** is that in the **Fandango de Huelva cante**, guitar and dancing follow the **compás**, the tempo is faster and the whole thing is more rhythmic. The guitarist also uses the same 12-beat harmonic cycles.

Finally, **Sevillanas** use the same 6-beat **compases** but there are some differences. This style does not have harmonic cycles, but unlike any other style, it has a specific rhythmic structure. Each style has its own **compás** and its own characteristics, but none of the styles (**Soleá, Bulería, Siguirriya**, etc) has a limited number of **compases**. Each performer can decide when to stop, after 3 or 300 **compases**. **Sevillanas** have a defined number of **compases** and they must conform to this metre. A **Sevillana** is made up of 4 separate **coplas** (verses) with the same rhythmic structure.

First the accompanying instrument (guitar, percussion or any other) plays an introduction. This introduction is free, and normally lasts 3 to 6 **compases**. The **cierre** is on beat 5 of the last **compás**:

**COPLA**

**INTRODUCTION**

**RHYTHM**: Guitar, *palmas*, etc (**compases** “ad libitum”)

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Next is the **cante**, the **melody**, a short musical motif played by any instrument. This is 2 **compases** long and ends on beat 3 of the last **compás**. Beats 4, 5 and 6 are used for the **cierre**. This part is called the **Salida**:

**SALIDA**

**MELODY**: Voice, guitar or any other melodic instrument (**Compases**: 2)

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**RHYTHM**

**Cierre**

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One **compás** of **rhythm** is played between **melodies**.
Next comes the opening melody, the **Salida**. This part is 5 *compases* long, and the melody ends on beat 3 of the last *compás*. Again, beats 4, 5 and 6 are used for the *cierre*:

### Cante 1

**MELODY**: Voice, guitar or any other melodic instrument (*Compases*: 5)

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*End of Melody*  \(\rightarrow\)  *Cierre*

Another *compás* of *rhythm* is played

### Rhythm

**Guitar, palmas...** (*Compases*: 1)

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The melody continues to develop. This part is also 5 *compases* long. The melody ends on beat 3 of the last *compás*. Beats 4, 5 and 6 are used for the *cierre*.

### Cante 2

**MELODY**: Voice, guitar or any other melodic instrument (*Compases*: 5)

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*End of Melody*  \(\rightarrow\)  *Cierre*

Another *compás* of *rhythm* is played

### Rhythm

**Guitar, palmas...** (*Compases*: 1)

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</table>
The last part is also made up of 5 compases. The melody ends on beat 3 of the last compás and the song ends on beat 4 with a chord and, if appropriate, on a percussion note.

**CANTE 3**

MELODY: Voice, guitar or any other melodic instrument (*Compases*: 5)

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccc}
> & > & > & > & > & > & > \\
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 \\
> & > & > & > & > & > & > \\
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 \\
> & > \\
1 & 2 & 3 & 4
\end{array}
\]

This is the structure of a **copla**. A complete **Sevillana** is made up of **4 coplas**.

**C) 4-beat compases**

**In 4/4**

(In Flamenco Mode)

- **Tangos** $\downarrow = 150\pm$ (also played and sung in Major and Minor Modes: Tangos de Málaga, Tangos de Triana)
- **Tientos** $\downarrow = 110\pm$ accompanying *toque*: **Mariana**
- **Taranto** $\downarrow = 150\pm$

(In Ionian or Major Mode)

- **Colombiana** $\downarrow = 150\pm$

- **Garrotín** $\downarrow = 150\pm$

(In Minor Mode)

- **Farruca** $\downarrow = 120\pm$
  
  (In any Mode: Flamenco, Major or Minor)

- **Rumba** $\downarrow = 185\pm$

All these styles are measured in 4-beat *compases*. The guitar follows 8-beat harmonic cycles in all of them, playing *rasgueado* between *falsetas* or *cantes*. Differences in tone, tempo and character make each style unique.
Although the accents are on beats 1 and 3 and this pattern is used to compose melodies, if you listen to the rhythm of the palmas or other percussion instruments you will notice something interesting. Beats 2 and 4 are more marked (especially beat 4), and they combine with the melodies to produce a fascinating wealth of rhythm. The cierre is on beat 3.

**D) 3-beat compases**

**In 3/4**

(In Flamenco Mode)

- **Verdial** $\downarrow = 110\pm$ accompanying *toque*: **Fandangos Abandolaos**: Rondeña, Jabera, Jabegote, Zángano, Fandango de Lucena.

* These *cantes* have the same harmonic structure as the **Fandango**. The *cante* is in Major Mode.

(In Minor Mode)

- **Campanilleros** $\downarrow = 185\pm$

  In this group, the metre is three beats (a 3/4 compás with accent and cierre on beat 1).

  **Basic compás**

  $$
  \begin{array}{c}
  1 \\
  2 \\
  3 \\
  4 \\
  \end{array}
  $$

In the Verdial, the guitar uses 12-beat (4x3/4) harmonic cycles with this traditional harmony when the rasgueado is played between falsetas or cantes:

**12-beat harmonic cycle (4x3/4)**

$$
\begin{array}{c}
1 \\
2 \\
3 \\
4 \\
5 \\
6 \\
7 \\
8 \\
9 \\
10 \\
11 \\
12 \\
\end{array}
$$

E F G Gb F
E) 2-beat compases

**In 2/4 or 6/8**

(In any Mode: Flamenco, Major or Minor)

- **Tanguillo** $\frac{\text{3}}{\text{4}} = 120\pm$
- **Zapateado** $\frac{\text{3}}{\text{8}} = 120\pm$

These two styles use the same metre, 2-beat *compases*, but like the **Fandango**, they are polyrhythmic. Here a binary *compás* with a binary subdivision (2/4) is superimposed on a binary *compás* with a ternary subdivision (6/8), so a *crotchet* (2/4) is equivalent to a *dotted crotchet* (6/8). When the guitar plays **Tanguillo** or **Zapateado**, triplets predominate.

**Basic 2/4 compás**

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
1 & 2 \\
\end{array}
\]

**Basic 6/8 compás**

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 \\
\end{array}
\]

4-beat harmonic cycle (2x2/4)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
> & \text{1} & 2 & \text{3} & \text{4} \\
\end{array}
\]

12-beat harmonic cycle (2x6/8)

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccccccccc}
> & \text{1} & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 & 9 & 10 & 11 & 12 \\
\end{array}
\]